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EXCLUSIVE: Taliban makes IEDs deadlier

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By Rowan Scarborough The Washington Times

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The Taliban has been building simpler, cheaper anti-personnel bombs made of hard-to-detect nonmetal components, increasing the number of lethal attacks on NATO forces in Afghanistan, according to a confidential military report.

The shift in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) away from larger anti-armor bombs has allowed the Taliban to produce more weapons and hide them in more places as they strive to kill larger numbers of American forces in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province and other contested regions.

The change in production from metal-dominated explosives to devices made of plastic is making it more difficult for ground troops to detect the buried IEDs with portable mine-detectors, creating an "urgent need" inside the Pentagon for better detection devices, the report said.

The new Taliban tactics are disclosed in a confidential report from the Pentagon's Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization, portions of which were obtained by The Washington Times.

The area around Now Zad, northwest of Kandahar, has experienced some of the most ferocious fighting for control of southern Afghanistan since the surge of 21,000 U.S. troops began last spring. News reports and military bloggers say Marines on patrol face a constant threat from hidden IEDs.

"Although the Taliban still fights with small-arms, rocket-propelled grenades and improvised explosive devices, they have increasingly focused the role of IEDs as antipersonnel devices," the report said. "Smaller, lighter, more quickly constructed and quite often triggered by a victim-operated switch [booby trap], these antipersonnel IEDs have been a significant factor in labeling Now Zad the most dangerous location with the highest U.S. casualty rate in either the Afghan or Iraq theaters."

The Aug. 11 report, titled, "The Taliban's Emerging IED TTPs in the Proving Grounds of Now Zad, Helmand Province," was written by an analyst at U.S. Central Command, which oversees troops in the Middle East and Afghanistan. TTPs is short for tactics, techniques and procedures.

The shift in tactics comes at a particularly sensitive time for President Obama. Sentiments inside the Pentagon lean toward sending more troops to Afghanistan, while key Democrats oppose such an expansion as the number of casualties grows in the theater.

The research Web site icasualties.org reports 328 NATO fatalities so far this year, already making it the most deadly since the war began in October 2001. The U.S. has lost 190 service members this year, after reporting 155 deaths last year.

In the past two months, more than half of the battlefield deaths suffered by NATO troops were caused by IEDs. This month, of 31 fatalities, 15 came from IEDs; in August, 46 of the 77 coalition deaths resulted from these devices, according to icasualties.org.

The Pentagon report said the Taliban IED research-and-development program used the Now Zad region to show that smaller, more numerous IEDs kill more people. The rate for dead and wounded for the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment stood at one-third of the unit in August, the report said. A typical Marine battalion has 800 to 1,000 troops.

A military official, who monitors Afghanistan and asked not to be named because he was not authorized to speak to the media, said the Taliban is shifting to small IEDs for a number of reasons.

"You've got the fear factor," the source said. "It's also less costly. It's easier for them to build those things and use them as opposed to running the risk of getting in firefights and losing people. The cost is

relatively low. We're fighting guys who from all appearances are from three centuries ago, but we can't figure out how to beat them."

The Pentagon report said the Taliban has become adept at mining a road called the "Pakistani Alley" -- so-named because Taliban militants use it to ferry in new fighters from the neighboring country.

"U.S. troop movements are split between foot and mounted patrols," the report said. "The terrain and deplorable road conditions often necessitate that foot patrols be conducted on uneven terrain. The Taliban have taken advantage of this by littering the area north of 'Pakistani Alley' with numerous antipersonnel IEDs to maintain control over their northern buffer-zone."

Robert Maginnis, a military analyst and Army adviser, said IEDs are tailor-made for Afghanistan.

"IEDs are effective in Afghanistan in part because of the terrain," Mr. Maginnis said. "There are few paved roads, which means planting a device in or near a road is easier and harder to detect by visual inspection. The increase in Taliban use of IEDs is due to the increased coalition forces in country, which forced the relatively small Taliban force to adjust its tactics. It stretches the force's impact."

Lt. Col. Edward Sholtis, a spokesman for Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan, told The Times the general has stepped up efforts to disrupt networks before they can plant bombs, and get better intelligence on where they are embedded in light of "the weapons' increasing use against coalition forces and because of the impact of a larger number of indiscriminate, victim-operated IEDs on the Afghan people."

"Like most everything in Afghanistan, the IED threat here is complex, and we go about addressing it in a number of ways," Col. Sholtis said. "Broadly speaking, there's an offensive component that involves intelligence collection tied to Afghan and coalition operations designed to identify and disrupt the cells that manufacture, place and operate IEDs."

"There's also a robust defensive component that involves a comprehensive reporting system that tracks IED events, disseminates threat intelligence to all levels, identifies emerging threats and lessons learned, and trains the force in the latest threats and countermeasures."

Two nonmetallic ingredients, salt solution and carbon, are being considered by the Taliban as IED trigger mechanisms, the Pentagon report said. The Taliban can harvest carbon from everyday batteries. This reduces the amount of metal, making detection difficult.

"The use of IEDs as antipersonnel mines offers several distinct advantages," the report said. "They are small and easily transported and emplaced. They are easily camouflaged and do not need to be remotely controlled. In addition, antipersonnel IEDs are almost always lethal to their victims and are extremely difficult to detect with current U.S. minesweepers."

One Taliban tactic involves waiting until NATO forces enter an IED field. Once a bomb explodes, the militants open fire with mortars and rocket grenades.

The military source said the Taliban is also thwarting detection by using long pull-cords rather than an electronic signal to ignite IEDs. This way, the bomb cannot be defeated by electronic countermeasures on vehicles and aircraft that jam the signal.

The source, who completed several tours in Afghanistan, said the Taliban strategy has been to abandon some villages rather than fight the Marines head-on. They then watch the Marines' routines and place IEDs along those routes.

The Pentagon report said the current mine detector, the AN/PSS-12, is not sufficiently sensitive to pick up the scarce metal in anti-personnel IEDs. "There is an urgent need to identify new man-portable detection platforms to expand the ability of U.S. troops to detect anti-personnel IED-mines," the report concludes.

One system now readily available commercially consists of electric field sensors, which can pick up electricity from nonmetallic conductors, the report said.